

Documentary Reader: African American Patients in Tuscaloosa's Mental Hospitals

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## African American Patients in Tuscaloosa's Mental Hospitals

### Introduction

Eighteen sixty-one marked both the official start of the Civil War and the year that Bryce Mental Hospital was established in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The mental hospital would become an industry leader in the development of more humane treatment of mental patients, ending the practice of regularly restraining and sedating patients. Later, the Bryce Hospitals would become infamous for their crowded and cruel conditions, and eventually faced a class-action lawsuit in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

After the Civil War, the mental hospitals in Tuscaloosa expanded. The institutions housed Black and white inmates in different buildings on the same grounds before a separate facility for African American patients opened across the Black Warrior River in Northport.

Enslaved skilled laborers built the original Bryce facilities, which were designed by a Philadelphia architecture firm hired by Robert Jemison, Jr., a wealthy slaveowner and Alabama politician. Jemison commissioned the construction of the mental hospital along with his own mansion in downtown Tuscaloosa. The mental hospital for African Americans— sometimes called “State Farm Colony for Negroes,” the “Jemison Center,” or the “Alabama State Hospital for the Negro Insane”—was built on land that had been a plantation owned by the Jemison family. The property, now sometimes referred to as “Old Bryce,” currently sits abandoned and graffitied, occasionally showing up in the photographs and videos of teenagers looking for supernatural experiences.

Conditions at the Northport facility for African American seem to indicate that it functioned as a forced labor camp, a form of slavery by another name. Most of the patients performed various types of agricultural and domestic service work as part of their “treatment.” Although both Black and white patients performed unpaid labor at the mental hospitals, Black patients were more likely to be assigned farming and livestock duties and more menial chores like laundry. The doctors at Bryce hospital justified these labor practices as part of the patients’ treatment, calling it “occupational therapy .”

Later, while both the Black and white Tuscaloosa hospitals remained in operation, a majority of the state’s African American patients were moved to an all-Black facility at Mount Vernon in Mobile.

This chapter examines the memories of African American patients at the mental hospitals in Tuscaloosa. It attempts to track the timeline of the mental health facilities and resources for African Americans in the Tuscaloosa area during and after Reconstruction, and to look at how Black patients were recognized by the larger community. The primary source documents included span from the late 1800s to the 1950s, providing an outline of the story of Tuscaloosa’s Black mental patients. The articles included from the African American newspaper the *Huntsville Gazette* show interest in the wellbeing of Black Alabamians who had been jailed rather than receiving treatment for mental health issues.

Other sources, including publications from the administrators and doctors of the mental hospitals, show that these facilities became sites of debate around public funding and care not just for the mentally ill, but for the poor, the alone, and the elderly as well.

Some of the language from white doctors and administrators shows the influence of scientific racism and the post-Reconstruction processes of criminalizing and pathologizing Black

poverty. For instance, Dr. Searcy, who took over leadership of the mental hospitals after Dr. Bryce's death, believed that the rate of insanity among African Americans was dramatically increasing because they were no longer being civilized through their enslavement.

Census records from 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940 list the names of all the Bryce patients (sometimes referred to as inmates). The documents included here are specifically the sections that list African American patients who lived full time in the hospital facilities.

Finally, 1950s articles in another African American newspaper, the *Alabama Citizen*, show local African American organizations, particularly those run by women, attempting to remember and provide entertainment for the African American patients at the hospital. These documents show communications between the white woman who served as recreation director for the hospital and the grounds of African American women. These documents show a glance of what life was like for the decades of African American mental patients before the Jemison Center closed in 1977.

#### Questions for Consideration:

The chapter provides a starting point for considering broad questions about mental institutions and their often-ignored Black patients, and how they fit into the communities where they are located. In Tuscaloosa, how have African American mental patients been erased and/or remembered? Why has the site of the African American mental hospital ("Old Bryce") been abandoned while the other Bryce Hospital location in Tuscaloosa is being preserved? What does the different treatment of the two Bryce locations tell us about memory creation? What attitudes did the people in charge of the mental hospitals have towards African American patients? How did understandings of race and of Blackness in the South affect how people thought about mental illness? How did local communities think about and interact with the African American patients at Bryce, how did the patients at Bryce fit into the larger community? Finally, these documents open up thought about how the African American patients at Bryce might be better remembered today. What other sources would be help us learn about their lives?

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### 1. The Road to the Plantation, The Road to the Hospital

This is an image of Byler Road on the Robert Jemison Plantation (known also as the “Crab Apple Plantation” and the “Cherokee Plantation”) in Northport, Alabama. During the segregated era of the 1920s, the former plantation became a “The State Colony for the Negro Insane” then the “Jemison Center,” an extension of Bryce Hospital for African American patients who performed farm and domestic labor as part of their “treatment.”<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> Historic American Buildings Survey, Creator. Robert Jemison Plantation, Byler Road, Northport, Tuscaloosa County, AL. Alabama Northport Tuscaloosa County, 1933. Documentation Compiled After. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/al1023/>.

## **2. Huntsville Gazette Updates on African American Mental Hospital Construction**

The *Huntsville Gazette* published several updates on the construction of the African American mental hospital in Tuscaloosa. The first news blurb comes from February 1887 and announces the legislative approval. While second September 1887 news blurb updates readers of the completion progress.

February 26, 1887:

"Alabama moves forward. The legislature has duly enacted bills providing adequately for buildings for an asylum for the colored insane of the state; also for a colored State University."<sup>3</sup>

September 4, 1887:

"The Alabama colored addition to the Insane Asylum, we are informed is being pushed rapidly towards completion. That is right. The insane should be taken out of jails as quickly as possible."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Untitled," *Huntsville Gazette* (Huntsville, Alabama), February 26, 1887, 2.

<sup>4</sup> "Untitled," *Huntsville Gazette* (Huntsville, Alabama), September 3, 1887, 2.

### 3. Inmate Jobs by Race and Gender

This table from the 1892 Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Alabama Insane Hospital lists the “daily occupations” of patients held at Bryce. The occupations are tallied by the race and gender of inmates, showing that the most common assignment for African American men and women was farm and garden, followed by knitting and laundry for African American women, and barn and milking for African American men.

Transcription:

Farm and garden: 41 white men, 51 colored men, 52 colored women

Diary: 2 white women

Lawn: 1 white man

Terracing: 98 white men

Laundry: 1 white man, 22 colored women

Slaughter House: 1 white man

Brick yard: 11 white men

Painters: 1 white man

Plasterers: 1 white man, 1 colored man

Assistant porters: 2 white men

Hog pen: 1 white man

Gas house: 2 white men

Baking: 3 white men, 2 colored men

Kitchen: 6 colored men, 3 colored women

Dressing vegetables: 8 white men

Stable: 2 colored men

Shoe shop: 2 white men

Mattress shop: 6 white men

Mat and novelty shop: 42 white men

Ward work: 63 white men, 10 colored men, 70 white women, 4 colored women

Dining room work: 15 white men, 3 colored men, 35 white women, 4 colored women

Tailoring: 2 colored men

Barn: 15 colored men

Milkers: 15 colored men

Tram drivers: 1 white man, 1 colored man

Poultry yard: 5 colored men

Sewing: 135 white women, 11 colored women

Knitting: 136 white women, 28 colored women

Carding: 15 white women, 2 colored women

Spinning: 15 white women, 1 colored woman

Ironing: 30 white women, 15 colored women

Tearing rags: 2 white women

Quilting: 4 white women, 5 colored women

Drug room: 1 white man

Store room: 2 white men

Unemployed: 85 white men, 16 colored men, 50 white women, 5 colored women

Sick in bed: 5 white men, 1 colored man, 7 white women

Acutely insane: 5 white men, 1 colored man, 18 white women

Diseased or helpless: 42 white men, 5 colored men, 15 white women, 3 colored women  
Other causes: 33 white men, 9 white women, 10 colored men, 2 colored women<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Biennial Report of the Alabama Insane Hospital at Tuscaloosa for the Years Ending 30th September, 1891 and 1892.* (Montgomery, Alabama) 1892. *Alabama Textual Materials Collection.* Alabama Department of Archives and History. <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/ref/collection/voices/id/3666>

TABLE SHOWING DAILY OCCUPATION OF PATIENTS.

	White Men.	Colored Men.	White Women.	Colored Women.		White Men.	Colored Men.	White Women.	Colored Women.
Farm and garden.....	41	51		52	Dining room work.....	15	3	35	4
Dairy .....			2		Tailoring .....		2		
Lawn. ....	1				Barn .....		15		
Terracing .....	98				Milkers .....		15		
Laundry .....	1			22	Tram drivers.....	1	1		
Slaughter house.....	1				Poultry yard.....		5		
Brick yard.....	11				Sewing .....		135	11	
Painters .....	1				Knitting .....		136	28	
Plasterers .....	1	1			Carding .....		15	2	
Assistant porters.....	2				Spinning.....		15	1	
Hog pen .....	1				Ironing.....		30	15	
Gas house.....	2				Tearing rags.....			2	
Baking .....	3	2			Quilting .....		4	5	
Kitchen .....		6		3	Drug room.....	1			
Dressing Vegetables....	8				Store room.....	2			
Stable .....		2			Unemployed .....	85	16	50	5
Shoe shop.....	2				Sick in bed.....	5	1	7	0
Mattress shop.....	6				Acutely insane.....	5	1	18	
Mat and novelty shop..	42				Diseased or helpless...	42	5	15	3
Ward work.....	65	10	70	4	Other causes.....	33	9	10	2

#### **4. Census Listing of African American Patients at the Mental Hospital**

This census form lists the patients who lived at the mental hospital in Tuscaloosa in 1900. The word “patient” is used to describe their relationship to head of house, and they are not listed as having occupations. There are similar census forms available from 1900–1940.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Twelfth Census of the United States, Schedule No. 1—Population. Tuscaloosa, Alabama (1900). AncestryLibrary.com.



## 5. Birmingham News Write-Up on Trustee's Report

This 1904 article in *The Birmingham News* discusses a recently released trustees report from the mental hospitals in Tuscaloosa and Mt. Vernon. The article discusses the board's struggle to staff the all-Black Mt. Vernon location.

Transcription:

Trustees Report on Insane Hospitals: Needed Improvements Now in Progress. Interesting Data from the Report of Superintendent J.T. Searcy.

The annual report of the trustees of the Alabama insane hospitals, including the Bryce hospital at Tuscaloosa and the Mount Vernon hospital at Mt. Vernon, have been submitted to the governor. The report is for the year ending September 30, 1904.

The trustees say that on the occasion of their annual meeting on October 19 and 20 they inspected the Bryce hospital and found the care and management of the patients conducted in a highly humane and satisfactory manner." The trustees say the patients enjoy as much comfort and contentment as is practicable with as varied a class of people, among whom are extreme and exaggerated ties of all kinds of deficient and defective persons.

The financial statements of the treasurer and steward are found to be correct. These accounts are regularly audited by the superintendent, but the volume of matter to be gone over is too great for the trustees to do at any one meeting and they request that the state examiners be directed to go through them in an official and expert way.

### IMPROVEMENTS.

A number of improvements are needed at the Bryce hospital to bring the old laundry, the water works, the kitchen, the fire room, etc., up to date and so they can meet the increased demands made upon them. The demand for more room for patients at both hospitals is very evident, say the trustees, and the contemplated additions are urgently needed. These improvements are now in progress.

The trustees conclude by commending "the humane and efficient treatment and care of the patients, and the able business management of the superintendent of the hospitals."

### SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT.

Superintendent J.T. Searcy, in his report, says:

"During the past twelve months the interests of the two hospitals have progressed along the same general lines. There is nothing particularly exceptional or unusual to report. The population has steadily increased, and, to meet the necessary requirements which have arisen from the fact, there has been an increase in the number of employees and in the aggregate amount of expenditures. The different departments have been under the same heads whose work has been adjusted to the increased demands and conducted with the usual fidelity and efficiency."

Dr. Searcy says that there is now a total population in both institutions of 1,733, an increase of 83 over last year—43 in the Bryce hospital and 40 in the Mt. Vernon hospital. There are 1,238 white patients and 56 colored patients at the former institutions, and 439 colored patients at the latter institution. At the Bryce hospital 1,185 patients are supported by the state. During the year 77 patients were re-admitted. Five hundred and twelve applications were accepted in the Bryce hospital during the year and 70 declined. Four hundred and thirty white patients were admitted.

At both institutions 596 patients were admitted, 334 were discharged, 181 died, and 515 were removed.

HEALTH IS BETTER.

“The general health of both institutions has been better. There has been no serious epidemic, and no casualties of an unusual character. The general work of the medical department has been conducted faithfully.

“At the Bryce Hospital we have, as a rule, applications ahead all the time for attendants and nurses. At Mt. Vernon, all along until recently, there has been trouble to obtain sufficient help for this work. For two years we worked faithfully to get suitable negro men and women. We spent considerable money advertising and sending out employees to find colored employees in the southern part of the state. They so generally proved inefficient and untrustworthy, and were so unstable in their connection with the hospital, we decided last year to employ white men and women. Considering all the worry and additional expense of obtaining and keeping suitable negro nurses, the white nurses have proved less expensive, and greatly more efficient. A noticeable change was at once observed in the care of the patients and in their satisfaction. The generally improved efficiency of the management on the wards is very apparent.

“The training school was very successfully conducted at the Bryce hospital last session; a school has been begun this fall at the Mt. Vernon Hospital.

“The crowded condition of the wards necessitate more provision in the next year for the accommodation of patients.”

The treasurer’s statement shows that the expenditures of the year amounted to \$203,422.50.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Trustees Report of Insane Hospitals," *The Birmingham News* (Birmingham, Alabama), November 1904, accessed in Newspapers.com.

## 6. Community efforts to support African American Bryce Patients

This 1952 article from the *Alabama Citizen*, an African American newspaper, discusses the holiday events organized by community groups for the African American patients at Bryce Mental Hospital in Tuscaloosa. The article also lists Tuscaloosa community members and businesses who donated to the Christmas gift drive.

Transcription:

“141 Negro Patients Made Happy By Xmas Visit of Legion and Auxiliary; Monthly Program Planned Inmates”

The hearts of the 141 Negro patients of the Bryce Insane Hospital were gladdened on Christmas Eve by members of the Dixon-Stephenson Post of the American Legion and the Women’s Auxiliary who played the role of the perfect Santa Claus.

These unfortunate individuals, neglected and forgotten, in many instances by the busy world were given new hopes and inspirations by the visit and gifts of the Legionnaires. Each of these patients received a beautifully wrapped Christmas package containing cosmetics, jewelry, soap, stationary, candy, and many other useful items.

The presents made possible by the last minute efforts of the Legion and Auxiliary and by the ready response of a generous public came as a genuine surprise to the patients and brought tears of happiness to the eyes of many. The Legionnaires had only two weeks in which to raise the \$65.04 in cash and the many other useful gifts.

When members of the organizations entered the hospital, a loud cheer arose from the inmates who were overjoyed to have company on this day. Mrs. Frank Prince of the Women’s Auxiliary led the group in singing Christmas Carols after Mrs. S.W. Washington, Jr. president of the Auxiliary delivered a short address.

Rev. W. B. Shealey, pastor of the First African Baptist Church who accompanied the party read the Christmas Story from the Gospel of St. Matthew.

Observers declare that this minister gave such a vivid explanative to the end. In closing, Rev. Shealey states “This Baby, this Christ will save me—He’ll save you if you will only trust Him and believe on Him.”

A fervent prayer was offered by Rev. Shealey at the conclusion of his reading. The organizations thank Rev. Shealey for his presence and cooperation in this effort.

The Legionnaires wish to thank Misses Bennie and Ruth Black of Montgomery for their assistance in wrapping the presents and the *Alabama Citizen* for the fine publicity given the effort. The general public is to be thanked for the splendid response and cooperation given the project.

Mrs. Washington stated that Mrs. Virginia Dobbins, Hospital Director of Recreation was loud in her thanks to the Legion for its efforts on behalf of the patients. She asked that other groups join these organizations in making monthly visits to the hospital and bring these shut-in patients a program of some type.

Any group wishing to entertain these patients are urged to contact Mr. Rogers and Mrs. Washington.

The Following Contributors are Gratefully Acknowledged:

Missionary Society, New Zion Bapt. Church, Rev. J. A. Johnson, pastor, \$4.00; White Roofing Co., Northport, \$3.00; Pete’s Beauty Shop, Northport, \$1.00, Northport Barber Shop, \$1.00; Peoples Cleaners, Northport, \$1.00; Mr. E.V. Grove, 25c; a friend, 26c, Pastor Piney Grove Church, Alberta City, \$1.00; Rev. B.B. Burns, Cottondale, \$2.00; Thursday Study Club, \$5.00;

Nellie Green 3 times 10 Club, \$2.00; Southside Sewing Club, \$2.00; Community Saving Club, \$3.50; Cosmopolitan Women's Club \$5.00; Elks, \$10.00; Hunter's chapel AMEZ Church, Rev. J.A. Belton, pastor, \$3.07; Mr. Frank Livingston, \$2.00; Mr. Frank Livingston, \$2.00; Mrs. Odene Little, 30c; Miss Joannie Hamilton \$1.00; Missionary Society, 1st Bapt. Church, Northport, Rev. O.S. Harvey, pastor, 25 gifts.

Gifts of jewelry, Cosmetics, perfume, cleanex, soap, etc.:

Pate's Grocery, Turner's Grocery, Cosmos Study Club, Nellie Green 3 X 10 Club, Mesdames M-c Kinley Miller, A.E. Luffborough, M.P. Tooson, B.B. Hardy, C.T. Johnson, B.W. Finch, Katherine Bertrand, Louise Bush, Bettie L. Long, Sadie Wells, Rhemus Rhodes, Annie Brown, Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel Penny and members of the Post and Auxiliary.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "141 Negro Patients Made Happy By Xmas Visit of Legion and Auxiliary; Monthly Program Planned Inmates," *Alabama Citizen* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama), June 1952, Newspapers.com.

## 7. Biennial Report Excerpt on Hospital Underfunding and Mental Health in Alabama

This section of the 1892 Biennial Report provides some context regarding the politics of the mental hospitals in Alabama. Here, the trustees of the hospital argue for better funding and greater general concern and resources for the mentally ill, discussing how many mentally ill people are homeless or imprisoned.

Transcription:

On the 30th of September, 1890, the date of the last report, there were 1,054 patients in the Hospital; during the year 1891, 276 patients were admitted; 91 died, and 109 were discharged. During the year 1892, 253 patients were admitted; 72 died and 163 were discharged, leaving 1,148 patients under treatment at this time, an increase of 94 during the biennial period.

Of the 272 patients discharged, 146 were entirely restored; 98 were improved sufficiently to admit of their return home with safety, and 27 were removed by friends or relatives unimproved. One man, white, was discharged, not insane.

Of the 1,148 patients remaining in the Hospital; it is shown that 562 are men, 586 women, 860 are white, 288 colored; 38 are paying patients, and 1,110 are supported by the State; and in round numbers, 125 suffer from acute and curable forms of mental disease, while 1,023 are hopelessly chronic and incurable.

The whole number of patients treated during 1891 was 1,330; in 1892, 1,383; the daily average was 1,115 and 1,146 for the two years respectively.

It will be seen by reference to former reports that the number of patients cared for at the Hospital has increased with each year; the number of insane in Alabama for whom the care and treatment offered by institutions such as this is desired, has also largely increased, owing in part to the disproportionate increase in the defective classes of the general population everywhere noted, and also in part perhaps to the gradual eradication from the public mind of the once wide spread suspicion and distrust with which asylums for the insane were regarded.

The increase in number of the insane has far outstripped the provision made by the state for their treatment and maintenance; no addition to the capacity of the Hospital has been made since the erection of the Annex for negroes in 1887. This building was quickly occupied by patients taken from the jails and poor houses of the several counties; and the institutions was soon as crowded as before. Two years ago our wards were filled to overflowing; since the, although we have, in compliance with the statute, given precedence in order of admission to recent and presumably curable cases, and have refused admission to many of the chronic and incurable class, the number of patients in the Hospital has steadily grown larger, until we, in common with the Legislature and the people of the State, are confronted by a matter of pressing importance, no longer to avoided nor postponed:

The urgent necessity for some further and immediate provision for the care of the insane of the state.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Biennial Report of the Alabama Insane Hospital at Tuscaloosa for the Years Ending 30th September, 1891 and 1892.* (Montgomery, Alabama) 1892. *Alabama Textual Materials Collection.* Alabama Department of Archives and History. <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/ref/collection/voices/id/3666>

### 8. Newspaper Description of Ceremony Featuring African American patients from Bryce

This 1939 article from the *Tuscaloosa News* describes the ceremony naming a new building at the “State Farm Colony for Negroes” after Jemison. The reporter describes the African American patients and attributes their happiness to their “occupational therapy,” meaning their time spent “tilling in the soil” at the mental hospital.

#### The Negro and His Talents

There were many impressive things at the ceremony of Friday afternoon when the magnificent new building at the State Farm Colony for Negroes was dedicated to the memory of Senator Robert Jemison, Jr. It was a notable occasion with a notable gathering paying tribute to one of the state’s greatest men, and columns could be written on the impressions which one got there.

Suffice it for us to mention this one major impression: Assembled there for the dedication were the inmates of the colony, negro men and women of all ages—all of them suffering from some affliction of the mind. They were, however, a happy lot. On their faces, happiness was so clearly written that it could not be mistaken, and even the casual layman could see that this was due in a large measure to what Dr. Partlow calls his occupational therapy. In other words, Dr. Partlow knew that these people would be happiest and most successful in tilling the soil; that this was the sort of work to which they were best fitted—and in putting them at the work which they liked and could do, Dr. Partlow has accomplished wonders with them.

Also at the ceremony was the Stillman Institute Glee Club. These young negroes sang two numbers, both of them spirituals, and surely no group of whites could even approach them in the beauty of their achievement. Like the field hands working on the farm, they were engaging in a thing in which they excelled; they were at home and no people off another race or color could equal them in what they were doing—and the thought again came to us that it would be so much better if the negroes of this country would bend more of their efforts to the development of the talents which they so abundantly possess, and less of their time trying to ape the whites in fields which they can never achieve anything more than mediocrity. The hope and salvation of the American negro lies not in making of himself just another white man who happens to have darker skin, but rather a person who can do things which no white can hope to do; a person who can be proud of his dark skin through the fact that it signifies just as much accomplishment, in its own field, as the white skin of the white man signifies in another field.

Booker T. Washington had something to say along these lines. Perhaps Washington wasn’t such a fool after all.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “The Negro and His Talents,” *The Tuscaloosa News* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama). October 29, 1939.